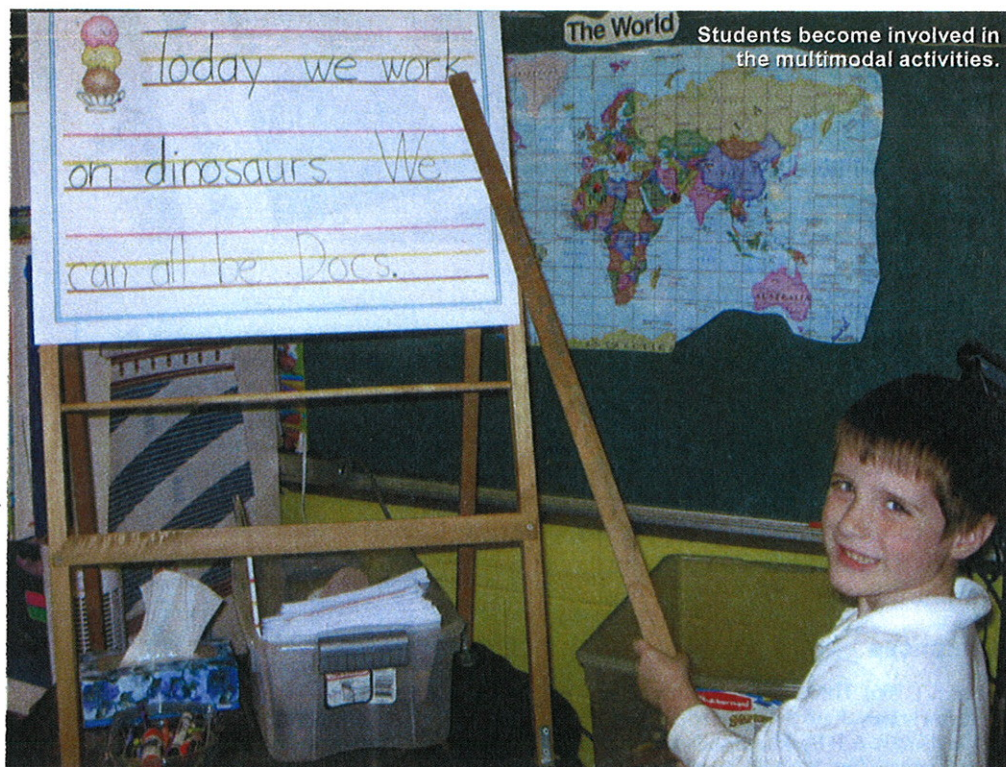


SUPERKIDS

Program Helps Students Improve Reading Skills



PAGE 36 AND 38 PHOTOS COURTESY OF PLAINFIELD CATHOLIC SCHOOL, PLAINFIELD, CONNECTICUT

Phonics-based instruction brings dramatic increases in reading abilities for young students in Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana

Pamela Peroutky

My tour through the exhibit hall during the 2007 NCEA convention in Baltimore was bittersweet.

This would be my last national convention because I would be retiring from our diocesan office after nearly 30 years in Catholic education as a teacher, principal and, most recently, assistant superintendent for the Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana.

My colleagues and I were touring the exhibits when we came upon a colorful booth with a smiling sun beaming down on all who entered the display. My friend nudged me to point out that Pleasant Rowland, creator of the American Girl Collection and founder of the Rowland Reading Foundation, was standing in this booth. See page 39 for an interview with Pleasant Rowland.

Rowland approached us and began to ask about our schools and our experiences in reading instruction. Once she learned that I had been a first-grade teacher who embraced the importance of phonics instruction and was currently responsible for the curriculum of our diocese, she questioned if our schools might be interested in piloting the foundation's reading program, The Superkids. I felt confident that there would be schools in our diocese that would be interested in giving The Superkids a try. Only later would I learn that this was not your ordinary piloting program.

With only one diocesan meet-

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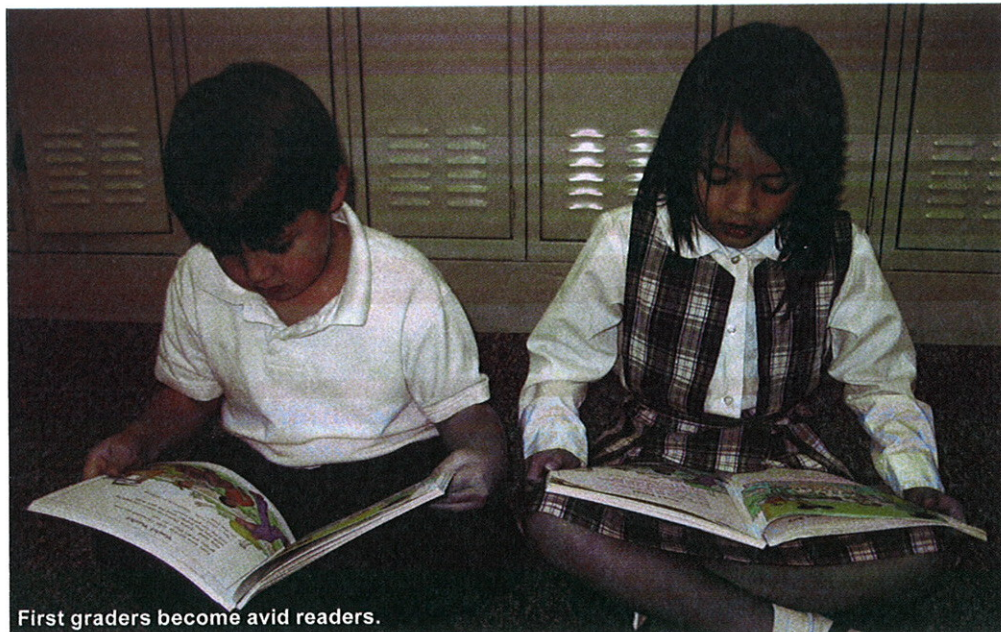
ing left in that school year—and that one solidly scheduled—I arranged a presentation following the meeting for any principals who wanted to attend. Five principals stayed and all five were interested in being a part of this project. They have since indicated that they have never regretted it.

Anne Dumas, principal of St. Augustine School in Rensselaer, Indiana, summed up the beliefs of all those involved:

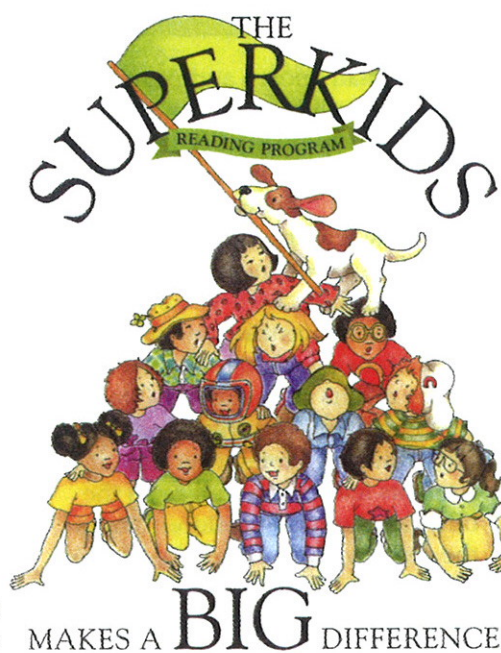
Students are excited to learn with Superkids and they gain confidence to read and write with great success. The teachers also appreciate how well the program is organized and integrates reading, writing, spelling and grammar. The support from Rowland Reading Foundation is excellent. The professional development along with personal contacts and on-site visits by the consultants have been very helpful.

As each principal completed the paperwork to become a pilot school, I became more aware of the requirements for participation. The children would be tested in the early fall just as they were beginning to use the program and then tested again in late spring to measure the growth in their reading skills after a year of using The Superkids. In addition, an implementation coach would be assigned to each teacher and would visit the classroom throughout the school year to answer questions that might arise and model any strategies or practices about which the teacher was uncertain.

This requirement caught my eye because I had just completed my own research on what successful professional development needs to be. I had learned that a key ingredient for influencing a teacher's instructional practice was to be in the teacher's classroom, directly involved with the issues confronting the teacher and revisiting those issues on an ongoing basis as the teacher attempts to alter



First graders become avid readers.



her classroom practices (Peroutky, 2007). I was impressed that coaching was an integral part of their program and asked who would be mentoring these teachers, because our five diocesan schools were the only schools using The Superkids in the state. That is how my relationship with the Rowland Reading Foundation began.

How Children Learn to Read

I have learned so much more about literacy instruction and what we now know about how the brain functions as a child learns to read. In my early years of teaching, reading was more of an art than a science. Ongoing

debates ensued as to which strategies successfully taught children how to read, but at that time there was really no definitive proof as to what worked and what didn't (Wolf, 2007). With the technology available to us today, we actually can see the different parts of the brain and how they are being activated as we read.

Reading is not a natural function that develops over time like walking or talking. Humans have been reading for only the last 2,000 years or so (Wolf, 2007). Pathways need to be formed within the brain that link the different phonemic sounds we hear to the written words we see. We then learn to read them and ultimately to write them (Wolf, 2007). It is the repetitive process of "hearing, seeing, saying and writing" (Rowland Reading Foundation, 2007, p. 3) that makes those routes permanent and creates successful readers. This is what I saw evolve as I visited the seven kindergarten classes that piloted The Superkids in the 2007-2008 school year.

I saw children eagerly awaiting the unveiling of the next Superkid and being surprised when it was Golly the dog, or three inseparable friends, Tic,Tac,Toc. My visits were scattered throughout the year. At the first visit I was pleased by the children's joy in being involved in all the multimodal activities of the lessons. But I was not prepared for the children's progress at my last three visits. By the second visit in November, they were blend-



Activities bring the stories to life.

ing words using only the sounds learned thus far. Not only were they reading them, but also they were writing them on colorful paper and beaming with pride at their success.

A frequent comment I have heard this year from the first-grade teachers who are now teaching those children and piloting the first-grade Superkids program is, "The children are so confident. They are not afraid to tackle any word. And when you ask them to write, there is no moaning and groaning. They are eager to put something down on paper."

By the third and fourth visits, children were reading books, putting on plays and writing words I wouldn't even expect a kindergartner to know. On one visit, when I was praising them for having just successfully spelled a five-letter word, one little fellow said, "Oh that's nothing! We can spell a nine-letter word!" Of course they had to show me and they did. Every last one of them correctly spelled "fantastic" and there was no doubt that they were what they spelled.

As I became more familiar with the program I learned that the methods and strategies that differed from my own practice many years ago were not only another way "to do it," but were founded on the latest research of the brain and child development. I began to realize that although I had taught many first graders to read, how much more effective I could have

been if I had known and practiced these research-based techniques.

The real epiphany occurred when I received copies of the letters sent to the five principals regarding the growth in reading skills their students had experienced during this year of learning with The Superkids.

A mean percentile rank was determined for each class in the fall based on the results of the SESAT (Stanford Early School Achievement Test). With this norm-referenced test, if the students learned as well as all the other kindergarten children across the country, their percentile rank in the spring should be essentially the same number. When I read the results I could not believe it—in every classroom there was double-digit growth ranging from 14 to 30 percentile points. If you looked at the results as a diocese, taking each student individually, the 112 students began the year with a mean of 54 and ended the year at a mean of 81. During my visits, I had seen that they were doing well but had no idea the test scores would show such growth.

The first-grade teachers eagerly awaited their turn to work with these children and this program. For them The Superkids would be going on "Adventures" that not only would entertain and mystify the students but also would teach them valuable life lessons. After an all-day summer training, one of the first-grade teachers said, "I have been teaching for

30 years and it has been a long time since I felt this excited about teaching any program."

Second-Grade Program in the Works

Now the second-grade teachers eavesdrop as the kindergarten and first-grade teachers marvel at what their students are doing in language arts and wonder what the second grade program has in store.

Over the last year and a half, Pleasant Rowland and her staff have been working vigorously on designing the second-grade program. Its format will be different from the first two years. There still will be a decodable reader, but now there also will be non-fiction magazines and a book club containing trade books by well-known authors (Rowland Reading Foundation, 2008).

The five schools will continue to participate in the pilot process for the Rowland Reading Foundation. I will continue to visit these children and marvel at how much they have grown over the last three years into confident, skilled readers and writers. It is a unique perspective I have had and it has been extremely rewarding.

If you should be in the exhibit hall at the NCEA convention and you spot the smiling sun grinning down on you, head that way. I would love to introduce you to The Superkids, share more of my experiences from the field and introduce you to Pleasant Rowland—if she hasn't started talking to you first.

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